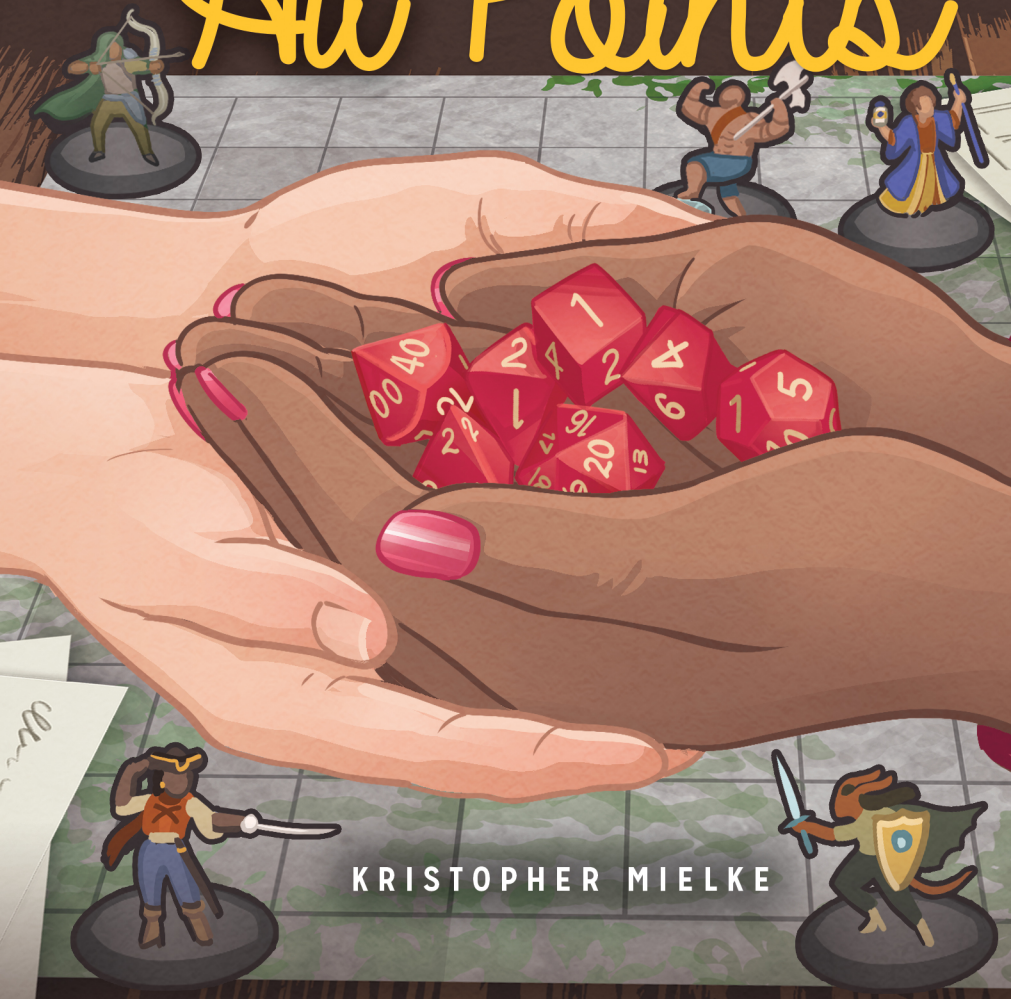


"Delightfully queer, wonderfully geeky,
and brimming with heart!"

– Darian Rudderham, Game Master, *Djinn & Tonics* podcast

Losing Hit Points



KRISTOPHER MIELKE

Losing
Hit
Points

KRISTOPHER MIELKE

JAMES LORIMER & COMPANY LTD., PUBLISHERS
TORONTO

*For Miranda, whose Help actions always let me roll with
advantage.*

Copyright © 2024 by Kristopher Mielke

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers acknowledges funding support from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada and with the support of Ontario Creates.



Cover design: Tyler Cleroux

Cover image: Kate Phillips

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Losing hit points / Kristopher Mielke.

Names: Mielke, Kristopher, author.

Series: RealLove.

Description: Series statement: Real love

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230535577 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230535585

| ISBN 9781459418097 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781459418080 (softcover) |

ISBN 9781459418103 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8626.I355 L67 2024 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published by:	Distributed in Canada by:	Distributed in the US by:
James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers 117 Peter Street, Suite 304 Toronto, ON, Canada M5V 0M3 www.lorimer.ca	Formac Lorimer Books 5502 Atlantic Street Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 1G4 www.formaclorimerbooks.ca	Lerner Publisher Services 241 1st Ave. N. Minneapolis, MN, USA 55401 www.lernerbooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

NOTE FROM THE SCRIBE

When I decided I wanted to write a book about queer teens playing D&D, I didn't know nearly enough about how to actually play Dungeons & Dragons. I'd only ever played a few times, so I borrowed several pounds of books from friends. I listened to podcasts and watched actual-plays on YouTube. I got really into Critical Role, Dimension 20, and Not Another D&D Podcast.

Despite all my research, I'm still not an expert. But the most important thing I realized was that I don't have to be. And to read this book, or to actually play D&D, you don't have to be either. As Brian Murphy says, "if you've listened to a D20 campaign, you've already absorbed enough knowledge to start your own campaign. So what if you have to look up the rules sometimes?" That doesn't seem so intimidating to me anymore.

If you're not already a D&D player, I hope Losing Hit Points gives you enough inspiration to start playing. Maybe you even want to borrow a few characters or locations. At the back of this book, you can find the character sheets and

*location notes I used to write Journey and Rumour's tabletop
adventure. Go forth, brave adventurers, and have fun.*

– K.A. Mielke, 2023

01 An Elf Walks into a Café

I'M FINISHING THE NEW ISSUE of *Daredevil* when my cousin, Hamish, spills coffee on his shirt. For, like, the tenth time.

“Why does Clive let you drink anything but water?” I say, scooching the comic away from the dots of whipped cream on the counter. “You’re cursed.”

Hamish brushes his fingers over the brown stains on his shirt. A white, short-sleeved button-up with a cacti pattern. It was a nice shirt this morning. “Clive

lets me do whatever I want because I'm the best at upselling.”

“Because you do nothing but read comics.”

“I'm sorry, Journey, is reading comics not cool? Are you not reading a comic as we speak? Did you not beg me to get you a job in a comic store?”

I did literally beg Hamish for this job. And when he said no, because it's a small place, because there are fewer than five employees, because Clive wouldn't appreciate Hamish asking for a favour, I used my special move: I told our moms.

Not my proudest moment, but I can't deny the results.

More than a comic shop, more than a board game café, Limited Series is a one-stop shop for nerd stuff. The kind of place I dreamed of as a kid, full of toys, comics, board games, and t-shirts.

This is actually where I bought the hat I'm wearing, a red *King of Coats* toque with the series' iconic Cufflinks of Clarity, four small silver diamonds that form one big diamond. *King of Coats* is a part of

my DNA. An instant nostalgia switch on my heart.

And probably the reason I'm a big nerd working at a comic book store.

We're in the South End, far from the foot traffic of downtown and not near enough to the University of Guelph campuses to ever really be busy. The only customers here are Greta and Nathan, Hamish's long-time friends and roommates, sitting in the dining area and waiting for *D&D* to start.

"How many paperback sales turned hardcover sales do I need to be as great as you, O Mighty Hamish?" I say, as Hamish dabs his shirt with a crumpled ball of napkins.

"You simply could never. There is no other quite like me."

"Yeah, that checks out."

Hamish takes another sip of what must be his fifth latte. More coffee spills down his chin, dripping from his ginger beard onto his round belly. He drinks more coffee when he's anxious, which only makes him more anxious, and I'll bet money this isn't his last latte of the night.

I set the issue of *Daredevil* back on the top of my To Be Read pile. I'll have to find out how Matt Murdock and Elektra mess up their relationship yet again when I'm out of the splash zone.

"Do you need a bib?" I ask.

"I'd wear a bib and make it look so cool, don't you test me."

I believe it. There's a style element to being publicly queer that I, non-binary and bisexual though I am, just don't understand. I dress like every straight boy nerd I know in my graphic tees and jeans. But I'm trying to be less basic with my open navy waistcoat.

Baby steps.

Hamish, on the other hand, pulls together the most fashionable outfits with half-off thrift store finds, even though when I go to the thrift store I only find t-shirts with wine mom slogans and pants that don't fit. He's like an alchemist turning lead into gold, except the alchemy is his natural confidence.

Even at four years old, Hamish refused to wear dresses. He told his parents, teachers, and bullies that

he was a boy and would be treated as such. That's how confident he's always been about who he is and what he wants. It shows in everything he does.

Which makes it weird how nervous he is about tonight.

“You're gonna do great,” I tell him.

“You don't know Nathan like I do,” Hamish says, stubby fingers raking through his blue undercut. “I let him beta read a short story for me once and he tore it to shreds — literally, he printed it off himself and ripped it up in front of me, he hated it so much. I've never met a harsher critic. Offline, anyway.”

“I'll be here to back you up.”

“Please, you couldn't back up a car with a rear camera. You're a wallflower. I'm doomed.”

The front door opens and an elf child enters Limited Series — I mean, a child dressed as an elf. Melting snow flattens their long black hair, dripping from the curls framing their chubby cheeks. They bump into the life-sized cutout of Tom Holland as Spider-Man and apologize to him as they prop him

back up. Their long green cloak brushes the snowy heels of their boots, soaking the hem. Dark brown ears match their skin tone but not their proportions, sticking out in a way that makes them look like one of those cute little desert foxes.

They look kind of familiar.

“Hi there!” Hamish calls, setting aside his napkins. “How can we help you today?”

“Um, hi.” The kid looks at their boots, their fingers playing with a loose thread dangling from their cloak. “I’m here for, um, *Dungeons & Dragons* night? Is that . . . a thing?”

“Another party member! That sure is a thing, a thing that starts in fifteen minutes. We’ll be setting up at that big table over there if you want to sit.”

“I just need to wait for my sister. She’s — oh, there she is! Rumour, come on!”

My heart skips a beat. I do know this kid. I’ve known him and his sister most of my life.

In walks my ex-best friend, Rumour Gatwa.

02 The Psychic Damage of Pure Awkwardness

SEEING AN OLD FRIEND shouldn't make me struggle to breathe. Or make my heart pound like I'm running a marathon. But it does.

She does.

Rumour's long black hair flows from the top of her high ponytail. Gelled edges curl in semi-circles on either side of her forehead. Snowflakes melt on her warm brown skin, beads of water rolling down her cheek. She's wearing long press-on nails, the same hot

pink as her shirt and her puffy winter coat.

For a long moment, Rumour takes in the store. Her gaze flicks from the giant stuffed spider, Shelob, hanging in the corner of the entryway to the seven orange Dragon Balls dangling by fishing line over my head. She stops at our stuffie collection of Sonic the Hedgehogs, *Stardew Valley* Junimos, and *Dragon Quest* Slimes.

Her wide-set amber-brown eyes glitter in their pools of pink eyeshadow. She looks like a sailor stumbling upon the Fountain of Youth.

I know that look. I'd worn that look. Limited Series really is Nerd Heaven.

But then her gaze settles on the cash register. On me behind it. And I guess Limited Series might actually be Nerd Hell, depending on how the next couple hours go.

I grab *Daredevil* like a lifeline. Should I hold it in front of my face and pretend I don't know her? That I'm not even here? I'm already rolling ones in both Charisma and Stealth, not to mention Acting Like a Functioning Human Being. I don't know what to do

with my hands. Breathing feels weird and I can't stop thinking about it, which only makes it feel *weirder* —

“Hey,” Hamish says. “You joining us for *D&D*?”

“Under duress,” Rumour says.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can tell she's looking at me. I don't return the eye contact. My fingers dig noisily through the box of open fidget toys on the counter, something I regret doing immediately on account of the noise. But now I have to grab a fidget because not grabbing one would be so weird!

“I don't know what 'duress' means,” says her little brother, Ian, “but I'm pretending it means 'heck yes and I'll love it!'”

“*D&D* isn't as scary as it seems,” Hamish says. “There's a little improv acting, a little random chance, and a little math — but mostly it's just us, hanging out and telling a story together.”

I flick a *Legend of Zelda* Hylian shield fidget spinner. I don't know how much she's changed, but the Rumour I knew loved telling stories. I just don't think telling stories with me is a great selling point.

But she says, “Might as well. I did spend an hour making a character.”

“That’s the spirit,” Hamish says. “I was just telling our young elf here that we’ll get started in a few, right around the corner. Can we get you anything to snack on while you wait? You could even roll a d20 and let fate decide.”

Hamish slides a laminated menu and a blue, gem-like d20 toward them.

“I don’t know if I trust my luck,” Rumour says, as Ian snatches up the menu.

“Fair enough,” Hamish says. “A critical miss is Halloween candy from who-knows-when, so . . .”

Scanning the pun-filled menu, Ian’s eyes light up. He holds it in front of his sister. “What’s a Solid Milk . . . snake?”

“It’s a *Metal Gear* joke,” I mumble, flicking the shield.

“And an actual milkshake,” Hamish says.

“It’s a stretch,” Rumour says.

“Stretching wordplay is part of our charm,”

Hamish counters. “No snakes were harmed in its making, though it is nearly solid.”

“I want one!” Ian says. “Can I get one?”

Hamish waggles his blue eyebrows. “See? The charm must be working.”

“All right, one of those for him,” Rumour says. “And I’ll have a . . . Hastega, please.”

“Legally I need to warn you, that has three shots of espresso.”

“Really?” Ian asks.

“No to the legality,” Hamish says. “Yes to the caffeine.”

Rumour slides twenty bucks across the counter. “I’ll need it if I’m going to brave the fast-paced world of tabletop roleplaying.”

“We’re not that scary once you get to know us.” Hamish pops open the cash register. He passes back Rumour’s change and also a palm-sized *Mario* coin block.

“Mine!” Ian says, snatching the block.

“Watch it with those grabby hands,” Rumour says.

“Put that on your table so we know where to bring the drinks,” Hamish says, even though the café is basically empty. “See you out there.”

Rumour thanks him, pockets the change, and turns to find Ian at the circular t-shirt rack.

With Rumour out of my hit box, I can breathe again. But my stomach squirms. Now I have to roleplay with Rumour all evening, trying not to make an ass of myself.

If it’s not too late, considering I already pretended I was invisible.

Hands busy with the rumbling espresso machine, Hamish nudges me with his shoe. “Why does she look familiar? And why are you acting so weird?”

Shit. Hamish noticed. That means it’s *way* too late.

“We used to be friends,” I say. “Like, best friends. Used to hang out all the time.”

The words don’t begin to explain what Rumour was to me. What she still is, even if it’s complicated and one-sided. You can’t scoop a single bucket out of the ocean and expect to understand its true depth. All the life thriving where the sunlight can’t reach.

I sigh. “You know her.”

“I babysat you all the time and I don’t remember her.” The machine spurts a noisy burst of steam. “Didn’t you only have, like, one friend?”

“Same friend. Rumour looked pretty different before she transitioned.”

“One of us, one of us,” Hamish chants.

Her brother looked different too. Ian used to be the cutest six-year-old in the entire world. But time stops for no ex-friends. Now he’s almost doubled in size, ten years old, and showing up at my work in a cloak and elf ears.

“And, if I’m not mistaken, you *like* like her,” Hamish adds, like a middle schooler.

“How dare you,” I say.

“Not a strong denial, my friend.”

“Doesn’t matter. There’s a good reason we’re not friends anymore.” In my chest, a knife of a memory twists. Guilt flows like blood from the emotional wound. “You better not make it weird.”

“I don’t think you need my help making it weird.”

“Not much of a promise.”

Hamish busies himself with the milkshake, grinning like a trickster god. I don't trust him not to get me into trouble with frost giants in an attempt to be my wingman.

Across the shop, Rumour gets down on one knee, at eye level with Ian. Ian's face has fallen, the excitement turning into nervousness or fear. He's balled up his cloak, holding it in front of his chest and tugging at its threads as he stares into the tabletop gaming room.

I remember the three of us roleplaying at the park in a thunderstorm, the summer before grade nine. One of the last times. I'm swinging a stick as long as my body, my imagination transforming it into the biggest, coolest anime sword. Rumour's standing up to her shins in a puddle, her stick held in the air like a staff — like she's causing the flashes of lightning in the sky. Ian's hanging from the climber, its metal support beams the legs of a monster, its slide a child-snatching trunk, and he's crying for help because he's about to be eaten.

My clothes are soaked and I'm happy, so happy.

Sure, it wasn't our safest roleplay session, but we played *King of Coats* all the time back then, in all weather. It felt like Ian was my brother, too.

Rumour speaks too quietly for me to hear. She points to the tabletop room. Then she points to the parking lot. Options.

They might leave. And if Rumour leaves now, she might never come back.

My heart somersaults. I know I was a jerk — in the past and also five minutes ago. Maybe my awkwardness gets a buff around Rumour and I failed my first saving throw. That doesn't mean I can't do better. Make it right.

I toss the fidget spinner back in the box, close *Daredevil*, and step around the counter. I'm at the t-shirt rack before I have a plan. They both turn to face me. Tears swim in Ian's eyes.

I grab a *Stranger Things* t-shirt and move it to the right with a loud screech of the metal coat hanger.

"Um," I say. "Hey."

“Oh, so you do see us,” Rumour snaps. Not holding back at all.

It’s a critical hit.

“I — I’m just —” *I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.* “I was really into the comic I was reading.”

“Sure,” she says without feeling.

“Is everything okay?”

“We’re fine.”

“I’m . . . I’m kinda scared,” Ian says, cloak wrapped around his knuckles. “I’ve never actually played *D&D* before.”

Rumour looks at Ian like he’s giving a robo-call too much personal information, but I kneel beside her. “This will be my first time, too. I watch a lot of *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*, but I’m nervous about actually saying things. *Out loud.* Maybe we can help each other out.”

“How?” Ian asks.

“We’ll be a team. If any of the trolls, in-game or around the table, try us, we’ll have each other’s back. What do you think?”

The grip on his cloak loosens. I can make out the points of the coin block wrapped inside the fabric. Even Rumour's glare softens — until she catches me looking at her and raises her shield once more.

“Okay,” Ian says. “We can try.”

At that, Hamish's Midwestern emo playlist cuts off. The nasally sung poetry about punching your dad is replaced by a gentle, 8-bit JRPG melody. The opening track to one of the earlier *Final Fantasy* games.

Hamish drums his hands on the counter. “All righty, folks. Who's ready for adventure?”